Contribution of Russian Specialists to the Study of the Bering Strait Region

By L.S. Bogoslovskaya

The Bering Strait region includes Bering Strait as well as adjacent lands and waters that are united together by the commonality of natural and ethno-cultural processes, which encompass terrestrial and marine areas of various size. Therefore, it is rather difficult to determine the outer boundaries of the region. Their location depends on the phenomenon or process being examined.

The natural complexes of the Bering Strait region form a unique biosphere that is connected with all the continents of our planet and represents the key eco-systematic component of the North Pacific and the adjacent sector of the Arctic. The Asian component is usually called Russian Beringia. Its main region, Chukotskiy Peninsula (*Figures 1-2*), is noted for its high level of biological diversity and productivity of marine and coastal ecosystems, unusual for the Arctic.

The Bering Strait region is an area of multiple migrations for ancient peoples. It is thought that this was the area where, about 15,000 years ago, the ancestors of the North American peoples crossed over from Asia. Thanks to its unique geographical location, Chukotka and Western Alaska played an important role in the history of Asiatic-American contacts for more than 10,000 years. Ancient and modern peoples left a gigantic complex of archeological monuments, from Paleolithic sites to much more recent dwelling and ritual constructions made of whale bone, as well as beautiful walrus tusk artifacts.

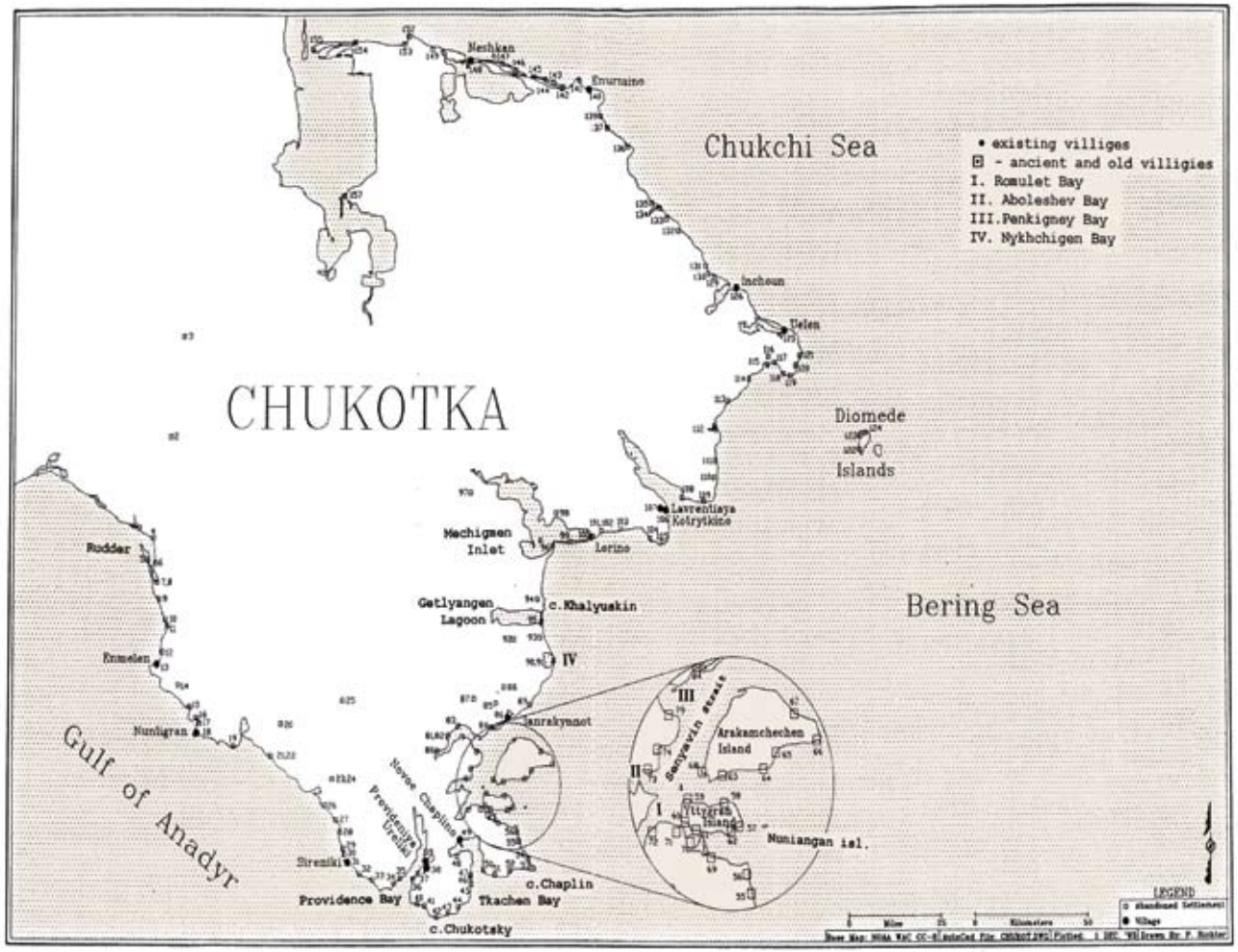


Figure 1. Map of Chukotka, the eastern end of Russia.

During the course of the eighteenth and to the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the scientific achievements of Russia in the Bering Strait region are associated with the names of Navy mariners and natural scientists that were included on the crews of the Navy vessels. The first were the two Navy expeditions of Vitus Bering and Aleksey Chirikov in 1741 and Ivan Fedorov and Mikhail Gvozdev in 1732. Fedorov and Gvozdev were the first to delineate the American coast line of the Bering Strait. Then there were a host of famous Russian mariners that studied nature and Native peoples of Chukotka and Alaska, which until the second part of the nineteenth century was called Russian America. This period was capped by the grandiose Navy hydrographical expedition on the vessels *Vaigach* and *Taimyr* in 1910-1915.

In the first part of the twentieth century, multiple expeditions of the USSR Academy of Sciences explored the marine and terrestrial geo-biocenosis of the Eastern Chukotka. In the second part of the twentieth century the work of the Botanical Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences (BI RAS, St. Petersburg) headed by Boris Yurtsev and the staff of the Institute of the Biological Problems of the North of the Far Eastern Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences (IBPN FEB RAS, Magadan) contributed greatly to the study of Chukotka Peninsula biodiversity. In particular the series of scientific publications by BI RAS should be mentioned. They were prepared in the beginning of the twenty-first century with a broad audience in mind: Terrestrial Vertebrates of the North-East Russia; Wetlands of Russia (volume 4); The Life at the Limit; The Red Book of Chukotka Autonomous Region (volumes 1 and 2).

During 1977-1992 the Chukotka zoological expedition headed by Lyudmila Bogoslovskaya and organized by the Institute of Evolutionary Morphology and Ecology Named in Honor of A.N. Severtsev of the Academy of Sciences of USSR (now the Institute of the Problems of Ecology and Evolution Named in Honor of A.N. Severstev of the Russian Academy of Sciences – IPEE RAN, Moscow) studied the biology of marine mammals and birds of Bering Strait

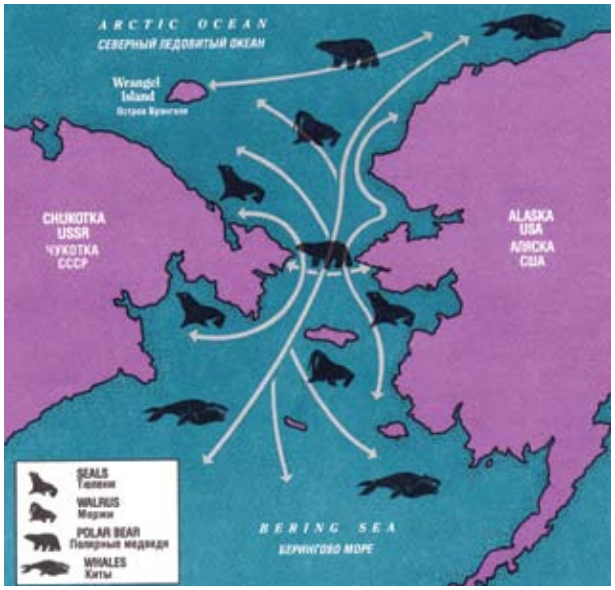


Figure 2. Migratory patterns for Arctic marine mammal subsistence species.

as well as the traditional culture of marine mammal hunting of Asiatic Eskimo and Coastal (Maritime) Chukchi. This work was continued in 1993 by the Center of Traditional Culture of Nature Use of the Russian Institute of Cultural and Natural Heritage Named in Honor of D.S. Likhachev of the Ministry of Culture of Russian Federation (Heritage Institute, Moscow). L. Bogoslovskaya (Heritage Institute) and Igor Krupnik (Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History) head this project.

As a result of many years of research, the maps of sea bird colonies, rare and especially protected species of orni-fauna, the areas of whale and pinneped concentration, and the map-diagram of ancient, old and modern settlements of Chukotka Peninsula coast (from Rudder Bay to Kolyuchin Bay) were compiled. The articles and books on the biology of marine animals and traditional life style of marine mammal hunters of Eastern Chukotka were published. The most important of them are: Igor I. Krupnik, Let Our Elder Speak. The Stories of Asiatic Yupik Eskimo. Recording of 1975-1987, 2000; Lyudmila S. Bogoslovskaya, The Whales of Chukotka, 2003; Lyudmila S. Bogoslovskaya, I. Slugin, Igor Zagrebin, and Igor I. Krupnik, The Basis of Marine Mammal Hunting, Scientific and Methodological Publication, 2007; Lyudmila S. Bogoslovskaya, V.S. Krivoshchyokov, and Igor I. Krupnik, (eds), Following the Path of Bogoraz, Scientific and Literature Materials, 2008.

The research of Vladimir Bogoraz plays an important role in the study of the peoples of Russian Beringia. In 1900-1901 the world-famous ethnographer worked in Chukotka as a member of the Jesup expedition. For decades, his monograph Chukchi has been an important and invaluable source of information on Chukchi and Asiatic Eskimo traditional life style. Bogoraz's remarkable ability to penetrate the very essence of other cultures and languages in our opinion can be explained by his outstanding talent and high general cultural level that were characteristic of him as well as of the other scientists of old Russia.

Alexander Forshtein and Nikolay Shnakenburg, both students of Bogoraz, continued the ethnographic study of Chukotka peoples and of their languages at the end of the 1920s. Unfortunately, the research materials of these specialists were completely lost or destroyed during the years of Stalin's repressions, with the exception of Forshtein's beautiful photographs that are partially published in the monograph Following the Path of Bogoraz.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, the leading figures in the study of traditional cultures and languages of the Native peoples were also students and colleagues of Bogoraz. Innokentiy S. Vdovin had a significant input in the studies of history and language of Chukchi. Ekaterina Rubtsova and Georgiy Menovshchikov (Institute of Language Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Leningrad branch) determined that during those years Asiatic Eskimo spoke three dialects of Siberian Yupik: Chaplino, Naukan, and Old Sireniki. Today specialists classify these dialects as independent languages. Inupiat Eskimo from Big Diomede (*Ratmanov*) Island had another language that belongs to the Inupiaq language group. Rubtsova's unique research Materials on the Language and Folklore of Eskimo (*1954*)

and Eskimo-Russian Dictionary (*1971*) remain invaluable and are significant contributions to science.

In the second part of the twentieth century Nina Emelyanova, Nikolay Vakhtin, and Aleksey Burykin from the same institute (now the Institute of Linguistic Studies of Russian Academy of Sciences) continue to study Chukchi and Eskimo languages.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Chukotka Ethnographical expedition from the Ethnography Institute named in honor of N.N. Miklukho-Maklay of the USSR Academy of Sciences (EI AS USSR, Moscow) worked on the coast of Chukotskiy Peninsula between Uelkal and Nutepelmen. The expedition was headed by Mikhail Chlenov who was the first to discover the famous Eskimo religious monument, the Whale Bone Alley.

According to I. Krupnik and M. Chlenov, five large associations of Asiatic Eskimo—Imakligmit (Imaklikts, about 100 people), Nyvukagmit (Naukan, about 350 people), Unazigmit (Chaplino, about 550 people), Avatmit (Avan, about 120 people), and Syginygmit (Sireniki, about 150 people) —existed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Each association consisted of several related family groups (clans or kinships) with their own historical names. The smaller tribal groups of Eskimo—Kigvagmit (Kivak), Imtugmit (Imtuk), Atkalkhagmit (Atkalkhak), and Napakutagmit (Napakutak) —existed until the end of the twentieth century.

According to the supposition of the authors, the coastal Chukchi also were organized into territorial neighboring groups at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Similar to the Eskimo tribes, the most ancient of them, such as Uelen, Inchoun, Enurmino, Yandagay, and others, consisted of several patriarchal kin groups with their own particular names.

Thus, less than a century ago, all Chukotka coastline was a continuous chain of Chukchi and Eskimo tribal lands with established boundaries, permanent settlements and seasonal hunting camps, strict rules of nature use and subsistence, and close family and trading ties between neighboring settlements.

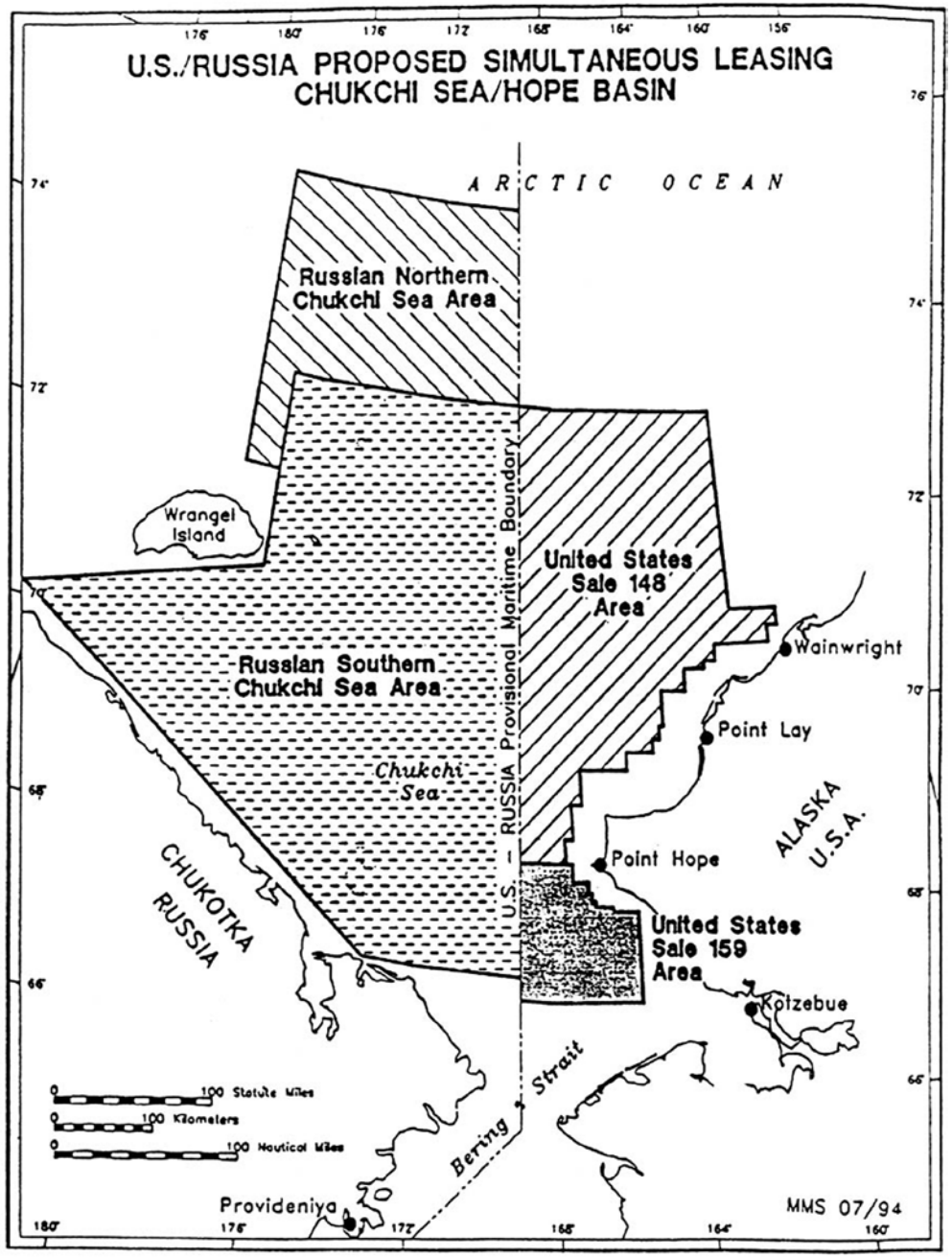
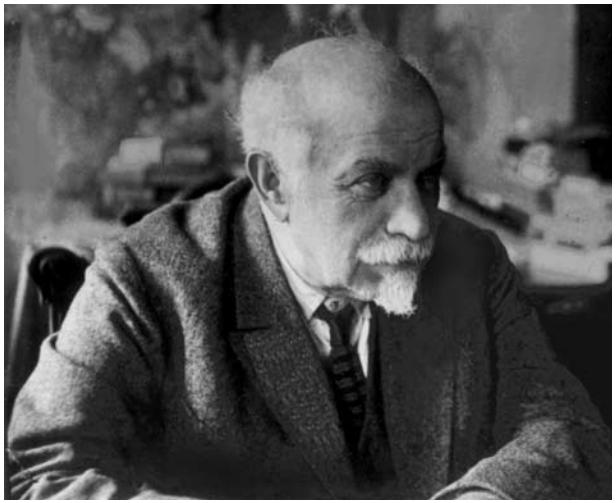


Figure 3. Map of the location of shelf target zones of the Far-eastern Licensing Program for the Potential Oil Development (Russia, Northeastern Oil Operations Agency 1993) and of the shelf areas of Alaska OCS Region for the planned exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons (U.S., Mineral Management Service 1994).



Photograph copyright B.I. Vdovin Archives

Figure 4. Vladmir Germanovich Bogoraz (1865-1936).

Photograph copyright Museum of Archeology and Ethnography Archive. #XXIII-481

Figure 5. Aleksandr Semyonovich Forshtein (1904-1968).

As a result of the relocation, merging and closing of settlements that occured during the Soviet period, only three (Uelkal, Sireniki, and Novoe Chaplino) of the 19 Eskimo settlements that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century remain. Sireniki is the only Eskimo settlement that existed in the same spot for more than 2,000 years. Chukchi underwent similar changes. Thus, in the area between the villages of Vankarem (Chukchi Sea) and Uelkal (Cross Bay) 25 Chukchi villages and reindeer camps were closed. As a result of the disturbance of the traditional settlement system, the cultural heritage of the Native peoples of Russian Beringia suffered irreparable damage.

Sergey Rudenko (1947) conducted the first archeological research on the east coast of the Chukotskiy Peninsula. Sergey Arutyunov and Dorian Sergeev (IA USSR AN, Moscow-Leningrad) continued Rudenko's work in the 1960s-1980s. Archeologists worked together with the outstanding anthropologists Mikhail Levin and Grigoriy Debets, and then Valeriy and Tatyana Alekseeva from the same institute.

The famous archeologist Nikolay Dikov and his employees from the laboratory of the Northeastern Multi-Discipline Scientific Research Institute of the Far Eastern Branch of Academy of Sciences of USSR (NEMDSRI FEB AS USSR, Magadan) started their multi-year research in Chukotka a little bit later. This scientific group paid special attention to the Paleolithic and Mesolithic sites.

Currently the Archeological Expedition of the State Museum of the Art of the Peoples of Orient (SMAPO, Moscow) headed by Kirill Dneprovskiy continues the research of Arutyunov and his colleagues. They are doing this in close collaboration with a group of paleoecologists from the Institute of Ecological and Evolutionary Issues of Russian Academy of Sciences (IEEI RAS) and Chukotka Heritage Museum Center (Anadyr'). An exhibit of ancient Eskimo art took place in 2007 and commemorated the activity of the Archeological Expedition of SMAPO. A wonderful catalog, The World of Arctic Marine Mammal Hunters – Steps into the Unknown authored by M. Bronshtein, K. Dneprovskiy, and E. Sukhorukova, was published for this exhibit.

Yuriy Shirokov and Mikhail Bronshtein, employees of this museum, study the ancient and modern bone carving of Chukotka craftsmen. The scientists' latest research is represented in the following publications: M.M. Bronshtein, I.L. Karakhan, and Yu.A. Shirokov, Uelen's Carved Bone: The Folk Art of Chukotka, 2002; M.M. Bronshtein, and Yu.A. Shirokov, Chukchi and Eskimo Carved Bone: The Artistic Crafts of the 1st – 20th Centuries from the Collections of the Museum of the Orient, 2008.

Archeologist Sergey Gusev (Heritage Institute, Moscow) began his work on the Chukotskiy Peninsula in the 1990s. He investigated many ancient settlements and discovered a Mezolithic site, Naivan, on Cape Chaplina. Recently, archeologist Alexander Orekhov (North-Eastern State University, Magadan) started to conduct test excavations in the area of Kivak Lagoon. Some time ago Orekhov dedicated much of his time to the study of the South Chukotka maritime culture (south portion of Anadyr Bay and the adjacent coast of Koryak Plateau).

During the last 30 years of studying and preserving the natural and cultural heritage of Russian Beringia, the joint work of the specialists and Native people became the most valuable type of research. This was started in 1975-1978 by the ethnographer Igor Krupnik, the whaleboat captain Leonard Botrogov, and the biologist Ludmila Bogoslovskaya. Now the employees of the Nature-Ethnic Park Beringia (Natalya Kalyuzhina, Director) and Beringian Heritage Museum (Tatyana Zagrebina, Director) continue this research. Zoologists Anatoliy Kochnev (Chukotka Branch of the Pacific Scientific Research Fisheries Center, Anadyr) and Andrey Boltunov (WWF – Russia) actively cooperate with the Native people.

During many years of successful cooperation a highly qualified network of observers was established. Over the course of 30 years these observers conducted the monitoring of marine mammals and climate change, recorded many stories told by elders, and compiled specialized

Figure 6. Members of the Chukotka zoological expedition and Native Eskimo from the village of Sirenki who in 1985 sailed in baidara (umiaks) along the Chukotka coast. Standing (left to right): zoologist L. Bogoslovskaya, lookout T. Panauge, motorist S. Nanukhtak, ornithologist B. Zvonov. Sitting: ornithologist N. Konyukhov and umiak captain V. Mienkov.

Eskimo and Chukchi dictionaries. These types of projects play a great role in preservation of Native cultures and languages. The aggressive influence of the Russian variant of Western culture and by socio-economic market relations has further endangered not only the ancient marine mammal culture, but the existence of Asiatic Eskimo and Chukchi.

The Native people aspire to strive to contra pose their traditional cultural values to this negative influence and to preserve for future generations the natural and cultural heritage of the region and their Native tongues. Because without them, the transfer of the traditional knowledge, customs and rituals from one generation to the other is impossible.

I would like to name just a few activists in this area: Artur Apalyu and Alexander Borovik (photography series: Whale Hunting, Ringed Seal Hunting, Yanrakynnot and Novoe Chaplino Inhabitants); Tatyana Achirgina, Roman Armayrgin, Tatyana Pechetegina, and Victoria Golbtseva (marine mammals and weather monitoring, compiling of Uelen wind and ice dictionaries); brothers Vladilen and Sergey Kavry (photography of the marine animals of the Arctic coast of Chukotka); and Valentina Leonova (hand written book Memory of Naukan). I especially would like to note an archival photo exhibit and two booklets that T. Achirgina prepared to commemorate the sad anniversary of the closing of the villages Un'azik' and Naukan in 1958-1959.

In conclusion I would like to note that by 1988 more than 100 countries recognized the special status for the Bering Strait region as a repository of world significance, containing answers to many questions about Earth's history. This provision was included in the resolution of the General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). However, currently this whole region is in danger due to development of the oil-containing shelf zone of Bering and Chukchi Seas on both Russian and USA sides (*Figure 3*). This is a source of great concern for the Native peoples of Bering Strait region and the international scientific community that work together to preserve the natural and historic-cultural heritage of Beringia.